

The Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine

News from Year 2022

The Year in Review

BY ROMELLA RYAN, PRESIDENT

The year 2022 will be one to remember especially for our Ukrainian brothers and sisters. With the outbreak of war in February, lives changed dramatically from building on a peaceful existence to mere survival. Accordingly, the missions of the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine also adjusted. To counter the impact of outrageous aggression on our brethren, we found ourselves answering requests for supporting refugee basic needs for food and shelter. Their sustainment became our top priority. We welcomed the opportunity and were inspired by their resolve to persevere. Their gratefulness to God was evident in every message received from Ukraine

Historically, we have supported the spiritual lives of the faithful in Ukraine. We have been able to continue much of this mission but new needs can be seen among the highlights below.

- Funding for food and shelter of refugees in Lubny and Myrgorod
- Assistance with the migration of the Single Mothers Home from war-torn eastern Ukraine
- Providing for the increased needs of the Sumy Soup Kitchen
- Appointment of a new Executive Director, Father Tomasz Jamka to replace the loss of Father Paul Wicker (see article herein)
- Refocus of the CONU sponsored film to identify impacts from years of Soviet aggression and the ongoing war
- New progress on the Church of Jesus of Divine Mercy in Myrgorod
- Trip by Vice President Ken Rackers to the frontline missions of CONU in Ukraine (see article herein)
- Success with donations from new CONU supporters

THANK YOU TO ALL THE WONDERFUL 2022 DONORS!

New Director for the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine

An Answered Prayer – Father Tomasz Jamka

Father Paul Wicker was an amazing compassionate man. As a founder and Executive Director of the Catholic Outreach for Northern Ukraine (CONU), his passing on May 31, 2021 could have ended his vision of love for the Ukrainian people trying to restore their dignity after decades of Soviet oppression. His vision in his words to “*develop a partnership of prayer and action*” with Ukraine was put to the test during a time first hampered by a worldwide pandemic and now a terrible war. Father Paul’s passing may be perceived as untimely but God has found a new leader for the CONU mission, an inspired man in Father Tomasz Jamka! Affectionately known as Father Tom, he exudes the same peace everywhere like Father Wicker and his compassion for providing support to the Ukrainian people is similarly well-ingrained and steadfast.

The Roots of the New Leader

Father Jamka, who hails from a small town in the mountains of Poland, started his Ukrainian missionary work in high school. Led, organized, and motivated by his high school geography teacher, he was instrumental in seven missions to Ukraine. These missions started with collecting donations of clothing, food, and other subsistence needs. His labors were followed by traveling to deliver goods to Ukraine and by providing support to their clinics. He has seen firsthand both the spiritual and economic needs of the Ukrainian people. His empathy for our brothers and sisters has been instilled in his very being starting from these early years.

Some examples of the oppression he has witnessed include the incarceration of his aunt for teaching the true history of her nation. She served four years in a prison cell shared by five women. When Tomasz was two years old, his father was fired from

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his job in Austria for refusing to join the Communist Party. These personal examples from Poland during the years of Soviet oppression are analogous to the attempt that the Soviet regime made to subjugate the people of Ukraine and impose socialist totalitarianism.

He also became very aware of the huge division between the rich and the poor, with almost no middle class. His empathy for the poor is immense.

Father Tom likens himself most to his mother. Also, refusing to join the Communist Party, she served as the principal for her school for 30 years. She viewed her role to be more than her job as an administrator. She built rich relationships with parents and children through compassion and love. This is how she made a difference in the world around her: seeing needs and fulfilling them however possible. That has left an indelible mark in Father Tom's heart.

Father Jamka's calling to the priesthood was not easy but was clear. In church, he repeatedly felt a spiritual calling. It was a significant change from what he thought was his destiny. Wanting to be a cardiologist, he had studied and passed entrance examinations to pursue that medical profession. Instead, he answered the divine calling and entered a seminary in Tarnow, Poland at age 19. His desire for education continued for 6 years concluding with a License in Theology which is one level above a Masters degree. Although a doctoral degree was considered, he desired to steer clear of the administrative roles assigned to those with PhD degrees. His desire was to have opportunities to work directly with people and change lives.

Why America? The Journey

The Holy Spirit helped Father Tom see the dire need for priests in the United States. Consequently, he requested permission from his bishop in Poland to come to America. He bravely arrived 6 years ago without any understanding of the English language. Much has happened since his incardination into the Diocese of Colorado Springs by Bishop Michael

Sheridan. He started with small eastern Colorado parishes in Limon, Hugo, and Flagler. The July 1st move to a large congregation at Holy Apostles Catholic Church in Colorado Springs is quite fitting. Installed as pastor by Bishop Golka on September 25 this year, he is now in the same role that Father Paul Wicker, the founder of CONU, filled for 35 years! Coincidence? Not! Father Tom's move to America, which he says is the "*best country in the world*", has been an easy transition because of its similarities to European culture. He humorously calls Poland his "*mom*" but has chosen America as his "*love and wife*"! He finds our citizens amazing and open to helping others. He is especially appreciative of the wonderful staff at his parish in his recent pastor role.

So why CONU? Simple. When the CONU Board of Directors asked Bishop James Golka for suggestions and assistance for someone to assume the helm vacant since the loss of Father Wicker, it was easy to see the natural fit for Father Tom to step into the role because he has inherited compassion for Ukraine and has already started filling the shoes of Father Wicker as pastor of Holy Apostles. Father Tom's answer is "*always yes for people*". It also should be noted Father Tom and Bishop Golka share ties to Poland, including the seminary in Tarnow.

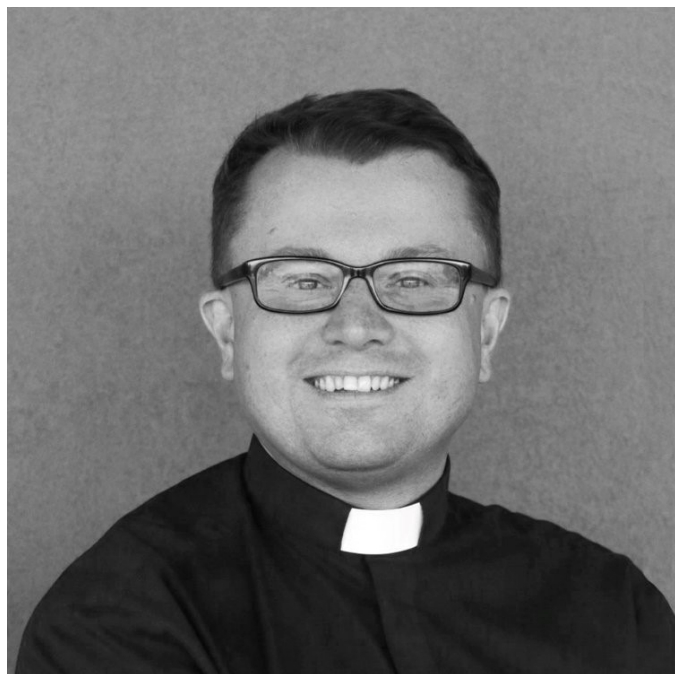
The Future for CONU?

When asked about the future of CONU and its mission, he looks forward to a time when we can move forward beyond focusing on dire needs introduced by war and return to "*working on spiritual aspects with our brothers and sisters in faith*." His words mirror those again of Father Wicker who stated we strive "*to share both in giving and receiving the many gifts God has given us, experiencing a greater depth of our human dignity in the one Body of Christ*." Hopefully, CONU will be able to assist again with recovery from Soviet oppression beyond diverting of support to war refugees. He understands that there are many groups competing for contributions for charities within the diocese and those specifically seeking to provide Ukrainian assistance. He wants all to know that CONU is alive and well. The all-volunteer

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Directors continue to feel the guidance of Father Wicker. With more opportunities to present within the diocese and spread the word in bulletins and social media, the CONU mission should be more visible and empowered. He looks forward to returning to missions of rebuilding churches, helping construct seminaries, assisting mothers respecting the dignity of life, and similar projects which foster the restoration of faith in Ukraine. In his role as the new Executive Director of CONU, expect to see him assisting with spreading the word as he continues his divine spiritual calling.



Father Tomasz Jamka. Appointed New Executive Director for CONU.

A Charitable Visit to Ukraine



Ken Rackers, Vice President of the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine, shares smiles with children residing at the House of Hope, a single mothers home in Ukraine

Why Visit during a War?

Any news snippet from Ukraine would keep most travelers far from eastern Europe, but not Ken Rackers! His drive is motivated by his designation as an honorary Ukrainian “Cossack” which was bestowed by Ukrainian Orthodox Bishop Mefodi of Sumi on a previous trip. The timing of this trip was to align with the anniversary of the National and Orthodox “National Day of the Defenders,” October 12, 2020’. When asked why travel during a tumultuous time during a war, Ken replied: *“It’s been a great honor to be designated a Ukrainian Cossack, along with 20 members of the Ukrainian military. I feel the honor and duty to help the people of Ukraine in the defense of their nation and struggle to maintain independence.”* Furthermore, Ken reaffirmed *“It is my duty and honor as a Ukrainian Cossack, and a former U.S. Army Soviet/Russian/East European Foreign Area Officer.”* It is easy to see how proud of his special designation as Ukrainian Cossack and this creates a special connection with the Ukrainian people. It’s also easy to see how loved he is by all those he connects with in Ukraine.

As vice president of the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine (CONU, see sidebar), Ken has been instrumental and devoutly engaged in all the missions of CONU. His inspiration started with a talk from Father Paul Wicker, a founder of CONU, about his mission in February 2018 at Our Lady of the Pines. Between trips, Ken regularly corresponds with all his Ukrainian contacts to ensure their safety and see how best to provide for their needs.

CONU Board of Directors

Fr. Tomasz Jamka	Chaplain, Executive Director
Romella Ryan	Board President
Ken Rackers	Board Vice President
Greg Sullivan	Board Managing Director
Jim Dalrymple	Board Member
Joe Ryman	Board Member, Treasurer
Jim Ryan	Board Member
Steve Fleet	Board Member

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On a Mission!

Ken landed in Krakow Poland on October 2 and crossed into Ukraine on October 3 to visit many people and places where CONU is refocusing its support to our brethren in need. His stops included Yaslovetz, Kamenetz-Podilskii, Sharovechka, Kyiv, Lubny, Sumi, and Lutsk. He returned to Krakow on October 11. Plans to visit Kharkiv were interrupted by ongoing missile strikes. Below is a summary of the mission stops.

House of Hope

The October 4th visit to the Home for Single Mothers and Children, also known as the House of Hope, found the residents migrated from Korotich, a village west of Kharkiv to an [old monastery in Yaslovetz](#) formerly part of Poland, southeast of Lviv in Western Ukraine. The upheaval didn't deter the sisters from Congregation of the Orionists from their mission of supporting and counseling for single mothers as well as assisting with education and care of their children.



Children pause from play for a quick picture and before communal prayer

Rebuilding and Persevering

The next stops were in Lubny and Myrgorod. In both cities, CONU has historically helped with rebuilding churches desecrated after years of Soviet oppression and promotion of atheism. In Myrgorod, with funds from an anonymous donor to CONU, Pastor Father Stanislav is building the Church of Jesus of Divine Mercy. Father Stanislav says it is now the most beautiful building in Myrgorod, which means "city of peace". Father Stanislav has also built with CONU assistance; the Church of the Divine Mother of Fatima in Konotop. Ken has a strong mutual relationship with the pastor. Ken calls father Stanislav the "Good Ole Boy" priest which is a loose translation from Russian phrase meaning "strong or manly peasant."

Currently Father Stanislav is using CONU's help to transform the lower level of the church into a well-known distribution center for food and subsistence. In a typical week, the church assists 200-400 refugees and local residents.



Man stands in bomb crater near the original House of Hope location.

Ken was thanked for the support CONU provides and shared that "I've never seen happier children anywhere". Many children would have been aborted or abandoned by their mothers shortly after birth at the hospital if not for the existence and support provided by the home. It truly is a house of hope, especially during this turbulent time.



CONU helps with essential supplies for refugees and residents In Lubny

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The Need for a Documentary

On October 6th, Ken met in Kyiv with the EWTN director and producer for a work-in-progress film. CONU is funding development of a documentary film about the effects of the war on the Ukrainian people. Key project personnel seen included Father Oleksandr Zelinski, the Director of EWTN in Ukraine; Vladimir Krachur, film director; and Artem Shemet, producer. This team is known for their inspirational work on the film, "Believe", a dramatic and historically accurate depiction of Soviet repression of people of faith under Stalin. Those involved in producing the new film expressed great enthusiasm about the opportunity to tell the story to the world about the impacts of the ongoing tragedy. Film release is expected in Spring 2023.

Building a Future with Christ

CONU continues to help fund the construction of the Saint John Paul Center for Seminary Studies and Laity Center. Consequently, on October 10, Ken met with personnel at the site in [Sharovechka](#) to see first-hand the status of the project. He learned that war's impact is causing a redirection. The center is now focusing on medical treatment for military and disabled children. CONU is helping Bishop Leon and the diocese in their support of war victims and refugees, and to build a national seminary, which is 70% done, but stills requires about \$2 million to finish.



Ken meets with Father Victor to discuss progress on the center and future initiatives

Impressions and Reflections

In retrospect, Ken proclaimed *"The Ukrainian people, everyone I met -- Catholic, Orthodox, refugees from the southeastern Donbas region occupied by the Russian military; wounded soldiers -- support the independence of Ukraine. They believe Ukraine will defeat and expel the Russian military. They believe God supports them and their independence. They are determined to defeat the Russian invasion. They are extremely grateful to the USA for strong moral support and the provision of military equipment, and to those who knew of CONU, they are truly grateful for the assistance being provided. They expect victory despite the hardships they are experiencing. They are stoic and persevering. May God bless their efforts and protect the nation of Ukraine. The greeting (and toast) I heard everywhere: Glory to Ukraine! (the response) To the heroes -- glory!"*

"The suffering of the Ukrainian people is sad to observe. Although I strongly support the struggle of the Ukrainian nation, the destruction, and deaths and injuries on both sides are horrendous. The complete expulsion of the Russian military from Ukraine, particularly from the Crimean Peninsula, may be a challenge, but Ukraine is having significant military success. To a great degree, what they have achieved in the fight against Russia – maintaining Ukrainian independence – is already a significant achievement, and the Ukrainian people, despite hardship, are confident and resolute to continue to fight and win. May God bless them in their efforts!"

It's so evident that Ken's resolve to help brethren in Ukraine is stronger than ever and his commitment to lead CONU during this time of most need is steadfast.

Highlights and Pictures from the Year 2022

THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS!

Your donations have been a special blessing during this year of increased need. May God bless you for sharing and helping our brothers and sisters in Ukraine during this most difficult time.

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'" Matthew 25:44-45

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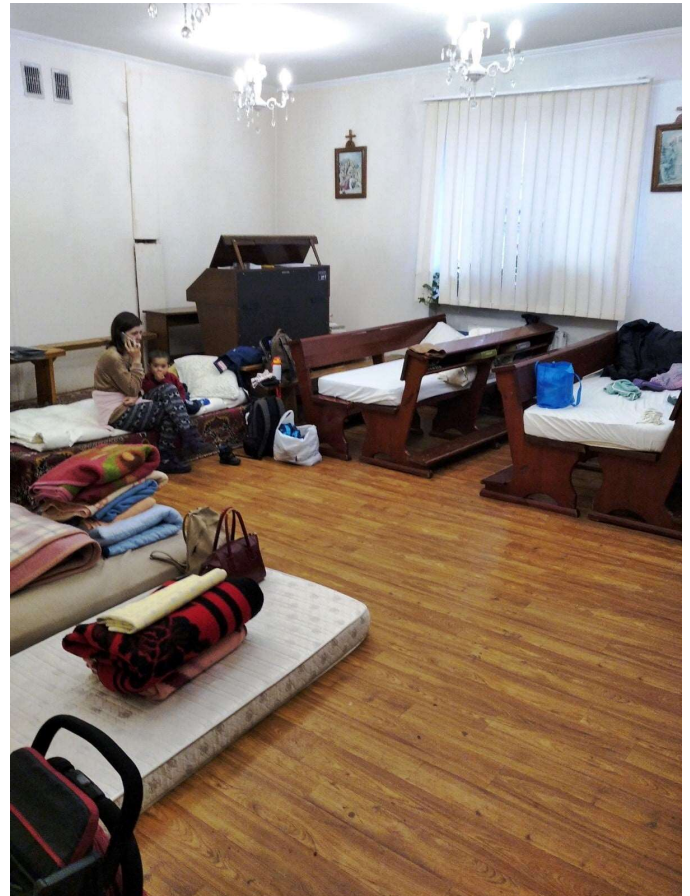
Father Stanislav is using the chapel in Myrogorod to store and distribute supplies to the war victims.



A video was produced by the Home for Single Mothers and Children, also known as the Hose of Hope. Due to war, they had to evacuate Korotich, a small village west of Kharkiv, Ukraine, and move to an old monastery in western Ukraine, SE of Lviv. The video was made to share prayers and thanks to CONU.



Donations are distributed inside the newly renovated church in Lubny



Pictured is a shelter for refugees from Eastern Ukraine. The accommodations provided to those needing to flee their war-torn homes.

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The church in Myrgorod has undergone some beautiful modification prior to the outbreak of war.

About CONU

Our Mission: To develop a partnership of prayer and action with and for each other in both our nations, allowing ourselves to share both in giving and receiving the many gifts God has given us, experiencing a greater depth of our human dignity in the one Body of Christ.

Our History: Since 1995 we have brought help to orphanages and rehabilitation centers in Kharkiv; have financially helped in teaching the blind community in Kharkiv, the Vincentian Depaul Center in Kharkiv; have helped renovate several churches in Ukraine, among them: Sumy, Romny, Rehalsk, Shotska, Oleysk, Korasten and have funded new building of churches in Konotop and Mirgorod. In addition, we have funded hospital patient needs, and a soup kitchen in Sumy. CONU was stood up as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2000.

Our Current Focus: To help keep safe the Ukrainian people in three of our dioceses that have been in the center of the madness. Recently, significant funding is being prioritized to assist refugees who need protection as well as for the care of war victims placed in harm's way. Due to the extent and duration of the impact from these terrible times, our ability to provide continued support to these efforts is in dire need. This also has forced delays and impacts on our foundational missions.

Our Leadership: We were blessed to be under the spiritual guidance and direction of Father Paul Wicker for over 15 years and are delighted to announce his role to be passed to Father Tom Jamka. See article herein. CONU operates under an all-volunteer Board of Directors and 100% of all donations and gifts go to CONU designated recipients and projects.

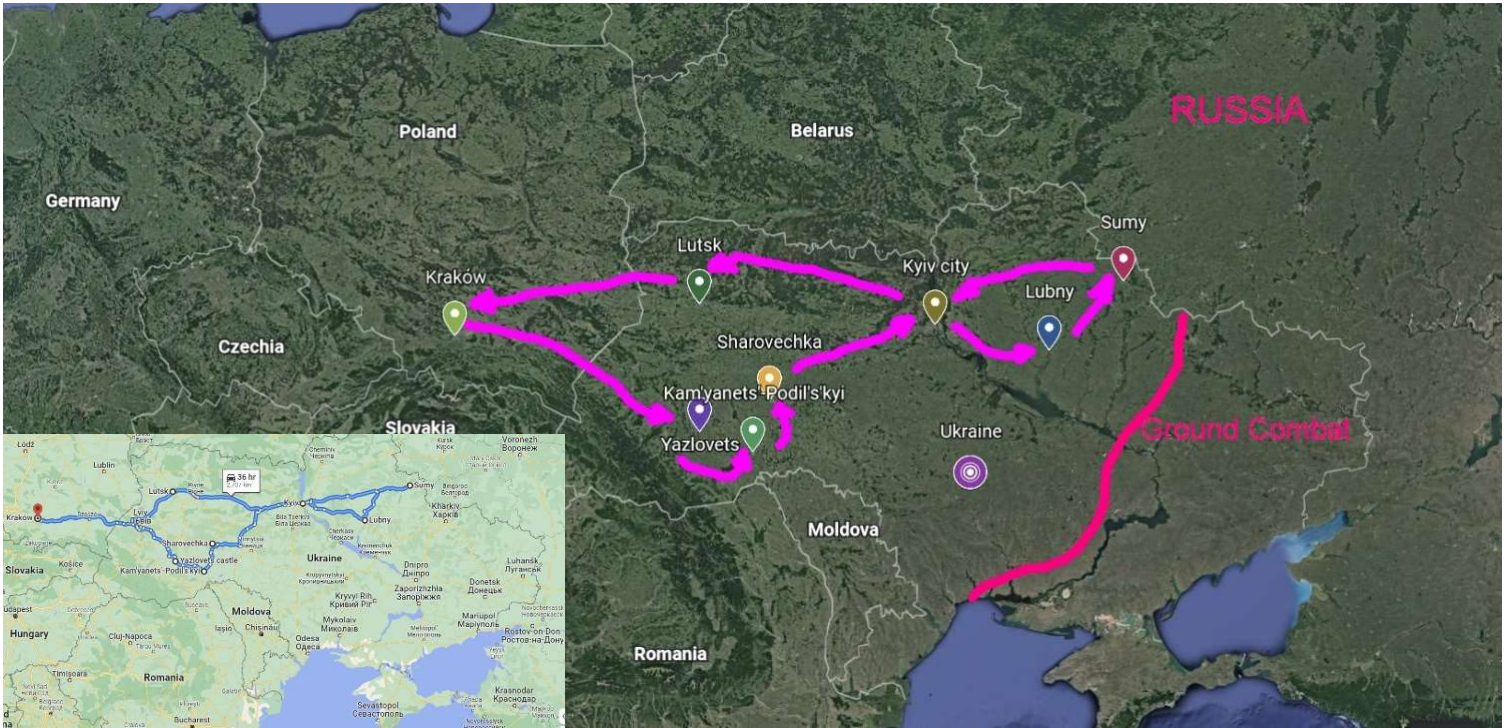
More Info: To learn more about the CONU missions, projects, volunteers, happenings, and events, or to assist with our support to our Ukrainian brothers, please visit <https://conuhome.org> or <https://www.facebook.com/CONUOrg/> or email greg.sullivan@conuhome.org



Fr Larry Solan, former pastor at St Mark in Highlands Ranch coordinated with CONU to deliver Stations of the Cross to Father Stanislav in Myrgorod. Ken Rackers delivered them personally. Pictured are two of the tapestries.

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The route for Ken Racker's trip to Ukraine in October 2022. There were 9 stops in 10 days, 2800 kilometers (1700 miles). The visit was to places and people that CONU supports. Please see article inside for more details on Ken's charitable visit.

The Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine (CONU)
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